

SPG #215, Proper 17

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Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

It may be more or less common to think of the early church in the first century as being made up of saints. Since those faith communities existed shortly after the earthly life of Jesus, the assumption is often made that for churches in general they were ideal. Or they are to be held up as kind of an ideal model for any church. However, if one spends some time studying the nature of those churches through reading scripture and other sources one can see that they were made up of a diversity of people. There were people who were on fire with Christ. They exhibited tremendous energy and enthusiasm in spreading the church and in developing the church. There were those who were of a quieter faith. There were those who had a thorough knowledge of the Jewish scripture. And there were those who were not so well versed. And there were those who had a lot of questions and doubts. And there were those all in between. But there are indications that the first century church was similar in many aspects to the church that we know. Many of the writings of the New Testament came out of those churches in the first century. And each writing is a product of the Christians who were in particular and unique communities of faith. There is some consensus that the gospel of John, for example, came out of an early church called the Community of the Beloved Disciple. Other writings almost certainly came out of the first church in Jerusalem. Others perhaps from the church in Antioch. The letters of Paul were all addressed to particular communities of faith with particular and unique dynamics.

There are indications that the church at Corinth was made up those who founded the church, and those sailors who came to the seaport of Corinth because they worked on a boat, and a number of prostitutes who had been active in the Roman temples there, and others. The church at Philippi apparently was a favorite church of the apostles as Paul speaks of her in glowing terms. As Paul wrote to these churches his writing came out of his own faith and out of his knowledge of the particulars of these churches.

There is a certain unique character to this faith community here in Grinnell. And if Paul could have written an epistle directly to this church, he would have considered first what was in his heart and mind regarding the truth of Christ. But then he would have considered the unique character of this church as he wrote. In a similar way, for preachers who prepare sermons in general, hopefully there is an awareness of the Word of God that comes via the readings. And there is some awareness of the people to whom one is speaking. I consider my conversations with the people. I consider what is going on in the church. I consider what is going on in the larger Church. And then I put the two together, the Word of God that appears in my heart and mind, and what is going on in the church. And so for today, after all of that, I am trying to discern what I perceive is the Word of God that comes out of the Epistle of James to this church in Grinnell on this day.

If any one sermon can be seen as an event in the service, then the preacher plays an important role in the event. The other major role in a sermon is played by the listener.

No matter who is preaching, there will be some sermons that are easier to listen to and some that are harder. That can have to do with the preacher. But it can also have to do with the listener. For preachers and listeners our job is to be open to the Word of God in heart and mind. Every sermon that is delivered will be attached to someone's personality. Every sermon will be attached to the way a preacher delivers that sermon.

Some sermons will be more entertaining. Some will be less. As a listener, considering the personality of the preacher, the way the sermon is delivered, and how entertaining the sermon is, as a listener, are you still able to discern the Word of God in the sermon for yourself?

In recent years, as I have attempted to move deeper into the Word of God, I have become more sensitive to the fact that anything I read in the scripture is always attached to a writer, to a personality, or more than one personality. And if one has some sense of the personality of the writer, then one is better able to glean a style of writing. Then one is that much further along in discerning the Word of God. Today's epistle reading is attached to the apostle James. Robert Eisenman in his book, James the Brother of Jesus, says that James as a personality was an uncompromising, in your face, no nonsense follower of Jesus. Eisenman also says that the Epistle of James, in his opinion, was written by James himself, and exists today like it did in the first century.

If we go with that, we see before us this no nonsense, uncompromising figure of a man, the apostle James. If he were here today in the flesh, there is a good chance we would not find him a comfortable presence. There is a good chance we would feel convicted by his confrontation. With that in mind, here are a few excerpts and some paraphrasing from today's epistle reading:

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. And then

But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

James was also the one who said elsewhere, **Faith without works is dead.** or, good intentions in the Christian life, in the church are fine. But it is what is done in the Christian life, the steps we take, the doing of the faith that moves us ahead.

James would say, "There's no mystery here. If you want the church to thrive, then take the necessary steps."

In today's reading: **If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.**

And so, in considering the words of James, and appreciating his presence to some degree, we can either relegate him somewhere or we can take him seriously as the bearer of prophetic words in the New Testament.

If we take him seriously, then we must ask ourselves if the "doing of the word" in our Christian lives is sufficient. Is it sufficient for our own life in Christ? For our own calling? Is our "doing of the word" sufficient for the church?

Perhaps it is sufficient. But perhaps it needs to be re-examined and looked at again.

James is the kind of person in the scripture who will challenge us to look one more time at our faith. And New Testament writers in general are famous for challenging us to examine and re-examine. There is an institutional church. But there really is not an institutional Christian life. The Christian life, as presented by James, is a life full of dynamics and energy. The possibility of change, of re-examination is always before us, if not via James, then someone else. I know from personal experience that change is scary. And many times God will knock on the door of our heart until we embrace a new direction, a new challenge, a new way of doing things. That knock may come as we encounter James. It may come in the middle of the week in a conversation, or in a prayer. And the real question is this: Am I being who I need to be, who I am called to be as a follower of Christ?

In counseling I have often worked with people in misery. And often the misery is related in part to them clinging to a way of life that no longer fits their circumstances.

And they are miserable because they spend so much time trying to keep things the same, trying to resist change. With so much energy spent on maintaining the status quo there is little energy left for being happy and living victoriously.

I have found that often change includes letting go of old ways and trusting that new ways will be revealed. In your Christian life, is there anything you need to let go of?

Are there new things that you should embrace? As I move among you in your homes and here at the church my heart has been warmed by how I see Christ working in lives.

There are many new things going on in lives here. New hopes, new aspirations, new anticipations. I increasingly see the promise of new ministry, new service.

However, in the economic downturn, via the mass media, there is portrayed a life near misery that has to do with the recession. And perhaps we catch ourselves on a good day wondering and saying, “What’s wrong with me. I feel OK. And yet I see and hear in the media that life is not good. So I must be missing something.” I would say that is one of those things that should be let go.

And I have found that in letting go of what needs to be released, and in embracing the new in Christ there is joy. Sometimes being a doer of the word, taking a step can be very hard. But sometimes that is what is called for. And it can make all the difference in the world in a life, and in a church. As I look over just the area of central Iowa I see many hospitals, clinics, service organizations, schools, and colleges that exist because at their birth there was one life in Christ that embraced change. The immense power of a life in Christ. The immense power of being a doer of the word.

So, I hope I have done a decent job in presenting the apostle James and his words in this sermon. And I hope that his persona and his words are things you will take with you as you go back into the various pursuits of your lives.

As I said before I have found that on the other side of change, of letting go, of risk is joy. And the call to happiness and joy as we serve is a call we all share. Many times the happiness that occurs is not what we expected. Because it is new, and we did not see it coming. Are we willing to let go and trust that God is urging us on toward a joy we cannot yet see? If we are, then we will realize the immense power of lives in Christ.

We will realize the immense joy of lives in Christ. And all because we were willing to be a doer of the word. Amen.